

Pensacola News Journal
For: Sunday, March 12, 2000
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“Azaleas in Full Bloom”

The northern Gulf Coast is famous for azaleas. Though we can't boast of outstanding fall leaf color, lilacs or tulips like more northern regions, few areas can consistently announce spring like we can.

Evergreen azaleas are a part of almost every landscape in the area. From the large growing Indica varieties to the dwarf kurume types, there is a color and size for use in many situations.

Now that azaleas are in full bloom, enjoy them until the end of the flowering season and then get ready to provide some maintenance to ensure their health the remainder of the year. Although well adapted to our region, they are among a special group of plants that should be treated somewhat differently.

Understanding how the root systems of azaleas grow helps to explain why some of the maintenance requirements differ from typical garden and landscape plants. They are members of the Ericaceae family, which also includes blueberries and heath. The root systems of plants within this family are very shallow and fibrous. They prefer moist, but not overly wet soil, and one that is relatively acid.

Fertilizing

Fertilize in March or early April with an acid forming fertilizer such as an “Azalea, Camellia Special.” Standard garden fertilizers should not be used for azaleas because many of them contain the nitrate form of nitrogen, which is poisonous to their roots. Organic fertilizers such as cottonseed and soybean meal can be substituted for commercial products, if desired.

Placement of the fertilizer is also important. Avoid concentrating fertilizer around the base of stems because severe burn could result. Feeder roots actually extend two to three times the branch spread of individual plants, so fertilizer should

be applied beneath and at least an equal distance beyond the branch spread. When fertilizing azalea beds or mass plantings, consider the area as a unit, rather than fertilizing individual plants.

Apply fertilizer at the rate recommended on the label. Extremely heavy applications can result in damaged plants or excessive growth. Always follow up fertilization with a thorough watering of the entire area.

Mulching

Maintain a mulch on the soil surface above the root zone of azaleas. Use a course material such as pine needles or bark and apply often enough to retain a depth of about 2½ inches. Keep the mulch from touching the base of stems by pulling it a couple of inches away after each mulching.

Pruning

Pruning is sometimes required to keep plants shapely and within bounds. Any heavy pruning should only be done between the end of the flowering season and about mid-June. This allows time for regrowth and bud set before winter. Avoid formal pruning or “shearing.” Rather, let azaleas grow to their natural shape if possible. The removal of occasional unruly branches and sprouts can be done any time.

Watering

Irrigation is needed in the absence of at least one inch of rainfall per week. Only one to two irrigations per week is required on established plants. Well-designed microirrigation systems work well in azalea beds. They use less water than traditional overhead systems and deliver the water without wetting the foliage each time.

Pests

Azaleas, though well adapted, are not completely pest free. There are three that are seen at times but can be controlled, especially if detected early. Watch for spider mites during hot, dry periods. Lace bugs are sometimes a problem in late spring and early summer. The leaf stripping azalea defoliator caterpillar often shows up in August and September.